DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 664 EA 029 351

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TITLE Using Beliefs To Enrich Learning: The Serendipity of Leadership Platforms in the Educational Administration Classroom.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beliefs; *Educational Administration; Higher Education; Learning Strategies; *Reflective Teaching; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Teacher Improvement; Teaching Methods; Values

ABSTRACT

The use of belief statements, or leadership platforms, may have uses and advantages as a pedagogical strategy beyond those cited in the literature. Some of the other uses of leadership platforms are described here. The paper details uses of the platform, pedagogical benefits of the platforms that are based on current theories of learning, and students' reactions to the development of their own platforms. The inquiry is qualitative in nature and contains descriptions of the pedagogy accompanying the use of platforms in an educational administration classroom. It also details how the instructor benefits from its use. The instructor's assumptions about how students benefit from such an approach, combined with interview data drawn from five former students, are presented to enrich the data. The paper focuses on checking students for understanding, encouraging each student's "voice," the effect of the platform on learning, what the learners think, helping students learn, constructing unique meaning, creativity and relevant learning tasks, social interactions and communication, and future use of the platform. It is hoped that students will be encouraged to revisit and update their belief statements. Contains 10 references. (RJM)

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ED 422 664

Using Beliefs to Enrich Learning: The Serendipity of Leadership Platforms in the Educational Administration Classroom

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EA 029 351

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Using Beliefs to Enrich Learning:
The Serendipity of Leadership Platforms in the Educational Administration Classroom

The use of leadership platforms, or belief statements, as a teaching tool in educational administration classrooms has been in existence for some time (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Kottkamp, 1982; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1983; Norris, Basom, Yerkes, & Barnett, 1996). Among benefits cited for the students are: clarification of personal values; actual formulation of an espoused theory; engaging in a deeply reflective process through writing; emotional involvement; trust building and respect among group members; gaining greater self understanding (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Norris, Basom, Yerkes & Barnett, 1996). By requesting that learners in her educational administration classes develop their personal leadership platforms, the first author has discovered uses and advantages of the leadership platform as a pedagogical strategy beyond those previously mentioned in the literature – thus, the serendipity of leadership platforms.

What the Paper Is About

This paper details for the reader, based on the first author's experience as a teacher of prospective principals, the following: 1) uses of the platform other than those generally mentioned in the literature on administrator preparation; 2) pedagogical benefits of the use of platforms, based on current theories of learning; and, 3) students' reactions to and their evaluation of the experience of developing a personal platform. In other words, the objectives of this paper are to describe the first author's varied uses of platforms in the classroom, to explain the perceived learning benefits both to students and to the teacher, and to present an account of students' reactions to such pedagogy. Additionally, the paper is enriched by the views of the second author, who has been a graduate student in the first author's classes.

A "Self-Description"

The paper, as a "self-description" of one slice of the first author's pedagogy, rests on a substantial amount of literature espousing the value of teacher narrative and reflection. Such a phenomenological approach can aid the "reflecting" teacher as well as others who read or listen to the narration (Ayers, 1992, Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Schubert & Ayers, 1992). Additionally, this type of sharing of classroom practices has been requested as desirable by some professors who teach educational administration courses (AERA Teaching in Educational Administration Special Interest Group Newsletter, May 1997).

This type of inquiry is qualitative in nature. As "teacher narrative," it is not "research for the sake of research." First, the paper contains descriptions of the pedagogy accompanying the first author's use of platforms in the educational administration classroom and how she benefits as an instructor from such use. Secondly, the first author details her assumptions, based on the American Psychological Association's learner-centered psychological principles, about how students benefit from developing their leadership platforms. Thirdly, interview data drawn from former students of the first author is presented to enrich the "self-description" and to check assumptions.

What About the Student Data

In an effort to check her assumptions about the benefits of requesting that students develop leadership platforms, P. Kay (the first author) enlisted the help of the other authors. The perspective of Debbie (the second author), a former educational administration student of the first author, permeates the text and has served as a "reality check" for the assumptions of the paper.

The third author (Wendy) actually conducted the open-ended interviews with five former students of the first author. From a complete list of P. Kay's students over the last 3 ½ years, identified by gender and race, Wendy randomly selected five names, purposively including at least one person of color, one urban educator, one rural educator, and two males. These five names were selected without P. Kay's knowledge. To ensure confidentiality and trust, the participants were assured that P. Kay would never be told the names. The interviews were taped and transcribed by Wendy, and the tapes erased immediately, thus assuring anonymity for the students.

The written transcriptions were analyzed with the help of QSR NUD*IST4, software for qualitative data analysis. Predominant themes that emerged from the data are reported in this paper.

New Purposes of Using Platforms – P. Kay's Perspective

When I first started teaching in a university setting 3 ½ years ago, I read as much as I could about effective instruction in leadership classes and eagerly adopted the practice of asking learners in my masters level educational administration classes to develop belief statements or platforms. I did this because of the

benefits I read about in the literature and cited in the first paragraph of this paper. In supervision class, I asked learners to develop their own supervision model; in school leadership theory, I asked them to write their philosophy of leadership; and in school systems management, I requested a management platform. In every class, I felt as if the students were deriving the benefits which previous research and theory had claimed. As I read these belief statements or platforms, I found that I began to extend the original purposes I had intended for the platforms.

Checking for Understanding – Guided Practice

Reading and editing the platforms, I found myself commenting on or questioning the learners' use of concepts, focus, or issues that we had engaged and/or learned in class. I realized the risk of this practice was that the learners would write only to please the teacher. I didn't want that to happen, but I did want the prospective principals to examine closely all of the salient issues for current leaders and decide what beliefs and values would drive them (the learners) as leaders. I would use questions like "Where are the children in your philosophy?" or comments like "This is a power-over word (or statement). Is that what you intended?" This practice of guiding the learners' thinking as they rewrote their belief statements was to me a form of guided practice. It was also a significant way for me to assess what the students had learned and actually integrated into their written platform. If important concepts or focuses of the class were left out of some platforms, I sensed that I might have more work to do (either individually or as a group) with those concepts, that those focuses might not yet be understood, learned, or integrated.

Encouraging "Voice"

I encouraged the learners to write statements that did not sound like a "textbook". I told them that these statements could be used in their professional dossiers as they sought jobs. I exhorted them to allow me (as their potential employer) to get to know them through their platform. I suggested that they communicate a very strong "voice" in their belief statements. I implored them to dig deep to find their beliefs.

Perhaps because they were deeply involved in presenting their personal beliefs, the students displayed a strong desire to see their colleagues' platforms. Thus began the practice of peer writing conferences. The learners are taught the peer writing process of "two pluses and I wish" and taught to ask questions and listen carefully when discussing a peer's statement. They are then paired up to read and hold conferences on their platforms. These peer conferences are held for two class periods (with edits in between) before the platforms are submitted to me for my edits. As these adult learners share their deepest beliefs about leadership with their colleagues, I seem to notice that they gain confidence in what they have written and became more willing to speak about their beliefs. Since it is one of my goals as a teacher to encourage "silent" voices to be heard, I am delighted that the process of examining beliefs and then sharing them in a "safe" way might contribute to that goal.

Effect on Learning

Are there benefits not previously cited in the literature as a result of students reflecting on and writing about their beliefs? From what I have observed in the classroom and heard from my students, I feel that the writing of belief statements or platforms leads to deep, integrative learning on the part of many of the students. I substantiate this assumption with what I perceive as the close link between the development of platforms in my classroom and three of the learner-centered psychological principles of the American Psychological Association. The three principles that I believe are carried out by the development of belief statements are:

> Principle 1: "learning is a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience, filtered through the learner's unique perceptions, thoughts, and feelings"
>
> Principle 7: "curiosity, creativity, and higher-order thinking are stimulated by relevant, authentic learning tasks of optimal difficulty and novelty for each student"
>
> Principle 9: "learning is facilitated by social interactions and communication with others in flexible, diverse [in age, culture, family background, etc.], and adaptive instructional settings" (American Psychological Association & Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory, 1993).

What was left to do was to check out my assumptions. Although student self-assessments and unsolicited comments for the last 3 ½ years have indicated that the development of belief statements did indeed lead to deep, integrative learning for several students, I wanted to substantiate the "self-description" of my practice with the perspectives of my students. Thus, Debbie and Wendy were contacted, the study was designed and carried out, and the data collected. The results follow.

What Do the Learners Think?

The open-ended interview questions were designed to check out the assumptions discussed previously. As qualitative research designs often do, these questions also elicited rich extraneous information, some of which will be presented in this paper. First, however, we will take a look at what thoughts the learners had in regards to my assumptions.

Check for Understanding – Guided Practice

No specific question was posed in regard to the platforms being a check for understanding of the concepts of the course. However, in three of the interviews, learners felt that the belief statement was a synthesis or pulling together of the course learning. This indicates that, for some learners, what they were learning was reflected in their platforms.

"It gives you a better understanding of what you're thinking and why, and it gives you a reason to let you know if you're on the right track. That is, if you're listening."

" It's just an organized way of, of putting it in your mind.... Once you've written it out, you know, it, like I said, it becomes much more clear to you...about management, instructional strategies, the way to handle people."

"So when you're writing or listening in class, and you are actually asked to think about it all along, it gives you time to reflect and to, as you read different pieces of literature, think' I understand now, given the research behind this, why I believe the way I do, why I think it works.'"

Evoking Voice

The question designed to address "voice" may have been badly worded. In response to "How did writing the platform affect your desire or ability to speak out in class?", all five participants indicated it did not have any effect. However, additional statements cast their responses in a different light. The three female respondents indicated that they felt comfortable speaking up in class at any time, either because they liked to talk or because they felt their opinions were always accepted in the class. It seems they just didn't connect the learning activities accompanying the writing and sharing of the platform with their feeling of comfort.

"No, in P. Kay's class, you can state your opinion, or your decision, or your philosophy, or whatever you want to call it...."

"No, I always felt good in her class. Very, very good. I felt comfortable, and I felt like she was a person that could, that I could identify with all the time."

Helping Students Learn

When asked the question "How did writing the belief statement affect your learning in the class?", all of the respondents, through elaboration, indicated some kind of a positive effect on their learning, although two of them initially stated that it had little effect on their learning. It was interesting to note that one of these two persons, a little later in the interview, had this to say about the effect that the platform had on her behavior (learning?):

"But, it affected my presenting (teaching), and how I looked at children, in the sense that...I think I gave more time to certain children that maybe I kind of had brushed off, and I started to look at them right.... Whereas before, I probably just presented everything in one big setting and didn't think about some of the children that needed another philosophy.... (it) made me very aware of these children that had no experience. These were the children that I teach. These are children that have never been out of their neighborhood. They're children that don't have books at home. You cannot expect those children to (have) the same learning style that someone who has books and who has parents that talk to them, interact with them in positive ways. So it helped me in that sense."

To me, this poignant musing makes it obvious that this woman has internalized in a very strong way a major learning from the class. She has applied this learning to herself as regards teaching and children and it is apparent that the writing of her platform actually brought about and made evident her learning.

Constructing One's Unique Meaning (Learner Centered Principle 1)

Although the learning facilitated through the writing of the platform may have taken place at different levels in different learners and may not always have been evident to the learners themselves, there was no lack of consensus that the platforms provided "a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience, filtered through the learner's unique perceptions, thoughts, and feelings."

The five respondents indicated in many different ways how much they valued the freedom to draw on their own experiences and express their own feelings in the platforms. Such an exploration of self led, for some, to life-changing discoveries, and, for others, to a reconfirmation of previous discoveries about themselves..

"I kind of like writing on my own beliefs, you know, and what I kind of like to write in that respect and not have to, to research things that somebody else thinks.... I like to put my own thoughts and words..."

"If I'm not the one constructing my own belief system, rather than her (P. Kay) telling me what I should believe as an administrator, nothing's going to happen."

"I've worked on figuring out and developing what my own belief was, so I was real comfortable with it. It was good to kind of check it out because it had been a couple years since I had done that."

"I never really valued it (my philosophy) until I was in class and I had to put it on paper and actually express myself."

Creativity and Relevant Learning Tasks (Learner-Centered Principle 7

I always experience a certain amount of resistance when I assign the writing of the belief statements. This resistance seems to be related to the students not knowing how to write the statements – not "knowing what the teacher wants". I purposefully do not give them models or formats, telling them only to keep it on one page if possible, no more than two pages. I give them general guidelines that mostly pertain to possible inclusion in their professional dossiers: lots of white space, readable, interesting, presented as an instrument to sell yourself, personal. I want to force them out of their boxes and to engage in the writing as a creative activity. I don't want them copying some preordained, formal model that will bind their thinking. This expectation of mine sometimes leads to consternation on their part, but can produce stunning work. (See Appendix for examples) I was surprised to see that all five of the respondents, even though some of them felt lost, seemed ultimately to prefer this constructivist approach and the freedom and creativity it brought with it. Thus, the data from this study seems to confirm learner-centered principle #7, "curiosity, creativity, and higher-order thinking are stimulated by relevant, authentic learning tasks of optimal difficulty and novelty for each student."

"It (a format) probably would have just made it too easy. I wouldn't have been as likely to push myself as hard, because I could have probably followed the format pretty easily and made it sound original and so I guess that's creativity."

"I felt lost. For the first, when she told us to write, we needed to write it, I felt like I didn't have one. I felt like I didn't have a philosophy. I thought if I had one it must be that I didn't know it because it didn't come to me right away. And then, as we did more reading and she did more lecturing, then I knew that I did have one and knew what it was.... And so, it was like she opened the door for me and for the girls I rode with, too, because we would say things like, have you ever thought of it like that, you know, and have you ever thought of it as like being a philosophy, and we hadn't, but we knew what our philosophy was after we talked."

"It probably made me be more creative, do more thinking, not follow somebody else's footsteps."

"I think it was a good teaching strategy because anytime you use a model, I think people have a tendency to kind of incorporate that even, consciously or subconsciously.... I liked it. I didn't want to have any preconceived idea about what a philosophy should be or a vision about leadership.... It allowed me to turn within and really reflect on what I believe, what my philosophy is about."

The assignment of writing a platform is made because I want the learners to explore their beliefs and values, since I remain convinced that their beliefs and values guide their actions as principals and educators. However, I make the assignment in relation to their professional dossiers, stating that they might wish to include their belief statement when they interview for a job, or pull from it to fill out an application or to develop their letter of application. I also talk with them about the possibility of using the dossier as a part of their own evaluation, but that doesn't seem to have as much relevance to them at this point in their career. All five respondents seemed to value the writing of the platforms as very relevant, very practical, and some even indicated that it gave direction to their daily practice.

"I mean, to me, that was practical application, so I mean, I think it was a valuable experience."

"It certainly helped me get my current job, because I was real clear about why I wanted to do what I'm doing.... I thought it was a pretty powerful tool during the interview, for me to be able to clearly talk about why I wanted the job and where I, where my, what beliefs were driving my desire to do that."

"I use it everyday. And like I said before, you know, sometimes you question, you question your decisions like any person in leadership does, but early on I put [in] the cornerstone that all kids can learn

and that if you look at what's best for kids, then your decisions become that much easier. So yeah, I use it everyday."

Social Interactions and Communication (Learning Principle 9)

I have a strong belief that learners will learn best when they can communicate about their learning with others (the need to communicate happens to be one of my learning preferences). This belief about learning happens to be supported by learning theory as well as by learner-centered principle #9: "learning is facilitated by social interactions and communication with others in flexible, diverse [in age, culture, family background, etc.], and adaptive instructional settings." A few students, at the end of every semester, always indicate that they learn as much from each other as they do from any other learning activity. They appear to value very highly interaction with each other. I added the peer conferences because the learners had indicated that they wanted to see each other's platforms, and I wanted them to see these platforms in a supportive social interaction that added some value to the encounter. Each of the five respondents did indicate that discussing their platforms with each other had considerable value.

"Well, it was helpful at a certain level because I would read theirs and I would think about things that they had talked about, and I could either think, yeah, those are some things I need to consider, or not.... I don't remember it having a huge impact on my changing things. I think I may have decided to think more on certain areas than I had before. I remember it as being a fun process; I enjoyed my writing group."

"It affected me mostly because it ... helped me see what other teachers and administrators, and staff, had going on in their school systems, and it really... firmed my feelings in most areas. I don't think I learned too much new, but I enjoyed that part in class about as much as any."

"I was in class with ...teachers who taught in the rural areas and not in the inner city, and as we were sharing our philosophies, sometimes I felt that the teachers didn't have a challenge, because they always received children that were already educated. And so I kind of, at times I felt like I would have liked to have been in that situation. And then other times I was glad that I was someone who was giving information that [the other learners didn't have]. Ant then some teachers shared, like teachers who were teaching in rural areas. That was interesting to me because I had never been in a rural setting.... I felt I learned, if it was no more than just by listening to them."

My Future Classes

Although it is not appropriate to draw conclusions from a qualitative study of five learners, it is pleasantly reinforcing to discover that the five respondents view the development of belief statements or platforms as a positive and meaningful activity. It is also gratifying to note that most of my assumptions about the purposes and benefits of writing platforms are borne out in the learner data.

The most frequent note of dissonance came from the two respondents who felt that their beliefs were pretty much already in place before being asked to write the platform. But those same two people strongly supported the activity and recommended that it be maintained in my classes.

Debbie, as conscience of this study, has served as an important reality check. She has confirmed the learner data with her own reactions where appropriate, and she has pushed my thinking in those areas where her own experiences do not confirm my assumptions. For example, when discussing my philosophy of encouraging learners to discover their own voices, Debbie recalled for me how she was forced to find her voice as a student in law school and later as an attorney. The method employed was directly at odds with my own practices and I will be forced to continue to examine that in order to reconcile it in my own mind and my own teaching.

The Scope of This Study

There are those who have suggested that my focus on platforms only is somewhat limiting and not necessarily new to the literature. As a disclaimer, I would offer that research focused on pedagogical practices in higher education leadership preparation programs, although extremely important, is somewhat limited. There seems to be little research that specifically addresses the teaching/training of educational administrators or educational leaders. An ERIC search of records from 1982 through March of 1997 revealed only 26 articles listed under "educational administration and pedagogy". Most of these articles dealt with educational administration programs and curriculum rather than actual teaching strategies. Books on the topic are also not abundant.

There is extensive evidence to suggest that leadership is essential for the redesign and reform of our educational system. One needs go only a little further to infer that the training of leaders is also essential for the redesign and reform of our educational system. Why, then, do we not have a wealth of

research, inquiries, and narratives based on the pedagogy of teaching/training educational administrators? This paper is a small piece of the larger picture-a picture that needs to be extended.

Final Thoughts

Teachers of future school leaders have an ethical obligation. For me, that obligation includes the necessity to constantly search for, create, try, and evaluate teaching/learning strategies. For me, that obligation also includes the necessity of listening to my students. Although the results of this study proved to be positive, some of the constant feedback I request from my students is not so positive, and requires much reflection and some change.

This study has confirmed for me, and hopefully for readers, the value of listening to one's students and being open to their suggestions. I also anticipate being able to read more accounts in the future of teaching strategies employed in educational administration classrooms.

As for asking students to develop their platforms, I will continue to do so. I feel very strongly that it helps prepare those future leaders for a very tough job. In the words of one of the respondents:

"I think that it's important that [professors] encourage their students to go back and revisit [their belief statements] and to update them continually, and to make sure that their behaviors are matching their beliefs. That's another area where we all fall down. We all know how to do a great diet but that doesn't mean we eat it. So if an administrator can look and see their belief system, the teachers can recognize it, if people can recognize it and know that's how they're operating, or if they're just saying one thing and acting another. It's a very powerful tool."

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